Martin O'Malley, *Governor*
Anthony G. Brown, *Lt. Governor*

SHA State Highway Administration

Darrell B. Mobley, *Acting Secretary*
Melinda B. Peters, *Administrator*

MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

August 24, 2012

Mr. Jim Turner
9719 Bellevue Drive
Bethesda MD 20814

Dear Mr. Turner:

Thank you for your letter regarding the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Intersection Improvement project at MD 355 (Rockville Pike) and Cedar Lane, Phase 4. The State Highway Administration (SHA) understands the importance of this project; not only for the BRAC in Bethesda, but also for the neighborhoods in the surrounding area. We have reviewed your concerns and requests for this project and offer the following response.

The SHA has acknowledged the effectiveness of the proposed Phase 4 improvement at Cedar Lane is tied to the long-term operations of the adjacent intersection of MD 355 and North Wood Road. The benefits of Phase 4 would be minimal if the traffic signal at North Wood Road remains operational during the PM peak period following construction of SHA improvements at the intersection of MD 355 and Cedar Lane. However, SHA believes the best operational outcome along the corridor would be obtained through a combination of constructing Phase 4, and deactivating the traffic signal at North Wood Road during the PM peak period. The SHA agrees our cost-benefit analysis and operational analysis must consider the possibility that the North Wood Road signal remains operational. However, before making a decision on whether to move forward with Phase 4, SHA has to work through a process previously agreed to by the interagency transportation stakeholders to determine if the North Wood Road signal should remain. With that in mind, SHA is currently examining a potential "hybrid option" at the intersection of MD 355 and North Wood Road.

Under the hybrid option, SHA would construct a channelized right-turn lane exiting North Wood Road, but would also continue to operate the signalized right-turn movements from North Wood Road during the PM peak period. In theory, this option would address the weaving concern for vehicles leaving the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC) installation, while minimizing the amount of red time required for mainline traffic along MD 355 northbound, thereby reducing delays for regional commuters as well as motorists leaving National Institutes of Health.

The SHA plans to fully assess the advantages and disadvantages of this hybrid option in the coming months, including its impacts on the Phase 4 project. If the hybrid option (or a similar design) is adopted as the preferred, long-term solution at North Wood Road, it would eliminate any future uncertainty at that location and allow the evaluation of Phase 4 to be finalized. Therefore, SHA plans to focus on developing and refining the hybrid option at MD 355 and North Wood Road before conducting additional cost-benefit analysis for Phase 4.

The SHA had previously considered widening along MD 355 northbound just south of North Wood Road. However, this option was deemed infeasible due to impacts to a Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority vent shaft, the Navy fence, and the WRNMMC view shed. This option helps to get vehicles to the intersection of MD 355 and Cedar Lane; however, Phase 4 would still need to be constructed to get vehicles through the intersection. Additionally, preliminary operational analysis indicated that a free right turn exiting WRNMMC will provide the best traffic operations at the intersection of MD 355 and Cedar Lane, which can be obtained by constructing a new lane starting at North Wood Road. Extending this lane to south of North Wood Road would eliminate the free right turn and thus decrease the operational benefit.

The majority of our traffic analyses results were based on the 2011 forecasts developed at the start of the BRAC projects. To supplement these 2011 forecasts, SHA performed additional traffic counts in March 2012, following BRAC implementation. These counts confirmed the traffic volumes entering and exiting the WRNMMC gates have increased at a rate consistent with SHA projections. These counts provide useful information regarding potential changes in traffic patterns at certain locations, post-BRAC. However, the 2012 traffic counts appear to be under reporting the peak hour demand through the study area intersections, particularly for through traffic along Rockville Pike, because severe congestion throughout the study area constrains the amount of traffic that can actually pass through the intersections during the peak hours. Therefore, SHA intends to continue to base our current and future operational analyses on the 2011 forecast volumes, rather than the raw 2012 traffic count volumes. The SHA feels the 2011 forecasts provide a better reflection of the actual demand needing to be addressed by the intersection improvements.

The SHA has been in close coordination with the Office of Economic Adjustment (OEA) regarding the time frame for our submission to OEA. Recently OEA has agreed on the possibility of unbundling Phase 4's funding from Phases 1-3. The SHA has to work through the separation process to secure funding for the Phases 1-3. Meanwhile, SHA will continue to move forward with the Phase 4 design and the National Environmental Policy Act process.

The SHA has been in close contact with your community throughout the design process. We will continue to coordinate the Phase 4 design, as appropriate, with all the stakeholders, including the Locust Hill community and your traffic engineer, Mr. Joseph Cutro, to provide updates on traffic analysis results and modeling assumptions. Please be aware SHA has obtained a copy of the letter from Locust Hill to the Maryland Historical Trust dated August 16, 2012, requesting that SHA study additional alternatives before granting a finding of "no adverse effect" for the Phase 4 project. The SHA will review that request and respond accordingly.

Thank you, again, for your letter. If we may be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me or Ms. Yuqiong Bai, Project Manager, Community Design Division, SHA, at 410-545-8816, toll-free 1-888-228-5003 or via email at ybai@sha.state.md.us.

Sincerely,

Barbara L. Solberg
Chief, Highway Design Division

cc: Ms. Yuqiong Bai, Project Manager, Community Design Division, SHA
Mr. Brian Young, District Engineer, SHA